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U.S. Role In S. Korea Defended

Ambassador Counters Revisionist History

By Fred Hiatt
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SEOUL, June 27—The U.S. ambassador to South Korea has launched a public relations offensive to counter what he says are historical distortions fueling the rise of anti-Americanism here.

In a lengthy magazine interview published last week in Seoul, Ambassador James Lilley rebutted a series of charges that have become gospel among many students, opposition politicians and common citizens here. All of the charges portray the United States as supporting military dictators here at the expense of South Koreans' democratic aspirations during the past 40 years.

As South Korea has liberalized and democratized during the past year, the allegations about the U.S. role have been discussed more and more freely. Many scholars and students now openly blame the United States for the division of Korea in 1945, the installation of a series of repressive rulers and the peninsula's continuing partition.

Lilley argued in the interview, and in a briefer newspaper interview in late May, that the United States, too, has been victimized by past South Korean censorship. He said that past regimes here used their control of the press to distort U.S. positions, trumpeting U.S. support while refusing to report any criticism from Washington.

Now that "the media and intellectual climate in Korea is changing," the ambassador said, Koreans should learn the full truth of past U.S. positions. He said he welcomed National Assembly investigations into the U.S. role in earlier coups d'etat and other matters.

Having succeeded in forcing democratic reforms through protests last year, leftist students in South Korea recently have been concentrating on new issues, chiefly anti-Americanism and the need for reunification with communist North Korea. The students have linked the two issues by charging that the presence of 43,000 U.S. troops in South Korea is an impediment to reunification, an allegation also frequently made by North Korea.

"I am particularly disturbed that some people seem to be linking anti-Americanism with the problem of reunification," Lilley said in his interview, which appeared in Korean in the Monthly Chosun magazine. "We realize it is a very emotional question for Koreans. . . .

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The U.S. has always supported peaceful efforts to reunify."

The recent student protests, while failing to gain widespread support from the general population as they did during last summer's democratization rallies, have received special attention because Seoul will host the Olympic Games in September.

Recent unpublished surveys show that anti-Americanism has grown among the general population and not just among leftist students, according to knowledgeable sources. Although a majority of Koreans still support the presence of U.S. troops here to help defend against a possible attack from the North, they are evenly divided as to whether the U.S. overall influence is good or bad.

That result marks a significant change from even one year ago, when more Koreans regarded the United States as a benign influence, the sources said. They cited several factors, including U.S. pressure on South Korea to open its markets to U.S. goods, especially cigarettes; student rhetoric, and the widespread belief in U.S. complicity in the South Korean Army's bloody suppression of a citizen uprising in the provincial capital of Kwangju in 1980.

During the eighth anniversary of that uprising last May, Lilley said today, anti-American rhetoric seemed to reach a new pitch. "There were some really nasty things being said and written," he said. "I just felt we couldn't be silent on it."

Some activists have charged that U.S. forces could have prevented the Army from crushing the Kwangju uprising. But in his inter-

views, Lilley said the United States knew little of the events in Kwangju, which took place shortly after former general and president Chun Doo Hwan seized power in a coup. He also said the United States, although it would command Korean forces in wartime, had no jurisdiction over the Korean troops used to suppress the rebellion.

The Kwangju incident, in which the government says about 200 civilians were killed but opposition leaders say as many as 2,000 may have died, remains a raw subject for South Koreans and a political problem for incumbent President Roh Tae Woo, a fellow general of Chun.

Lilley noted that U.S. officials criticized the Army's behavior at Kwangju and the imposition of martial law but said those criticisms never reached the Korean public. The media here, he said, "gave the impression that the U.S. didn't care about much except the threat from North Korea."

"That just wasn't true," he said.

Lilley also responded to criticism of President Reagan for inviting Chun to the White House as his first head-of-state visitor in January 1981. Chun blanketed South Korea with publicity about the visit, which came shortly after his unpopular coup and just before he staged elections to give himself a seven-year term as president.

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Lilley said "many calculations" went into the decision to invite Chun. "Frankly, boosting President Chun's image in Korea . . . was not among our reasons," he said.

Instead, the visit was intended to show the Reagan administration's resolve to stand fast against communism throughout the world, he said.

Lilley added that Reagan did not agree to the meeting until Chun promised not to execute Kim Dae Jung, a longtime opposition leader

whom Chun had imprisoned on charges of sedition. Kim, who has frequently criticized the United States for supporting authoritarian regimes here, is now chief opposition leader in the newly invigorated National Assembly.

Lilley devoted most of this week's interview to rebutting the oldest charges, that the United States was responsible for the division of Korea after World War II.

The continuing sensitivity of that 40-year-old history became evident again today when the South Korean government said it is considering prosecuting companies that had published banned history books about the occupation period. Several of the books offer "revisionist" interpretations of resistance to the U.S. occupation from 1945 to 1948.

Some revisionist scholars maintain that the United States sacrificed Korea to the Cold War, installing an unpopular and conservative regime to serve its own interests. But Lilley said the U.S. actions were the only way to prevent a total communist takeover of the peninsula.

"I think the U.S. made the right decision, and I think any Korean who seriously considers what it would be like to be living under [North Korean leader] Kim Il Sung probably agrees," he said.